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INFECTIOUS DISEASES OF RABBITS

Two serious diseases caused by viruses are rarely seen in indoor pet. They are **myxomatosis** and **viral hemorrhagic disease**. Because they are viral diseases there are no effective treatments once the rabbit is infected.

Myxomatosis

This is caused by the myxoma virus, which is widely distributed in the wild rabbit population. You might argue that your rabbit never comes into direct contact with animals from the wild. The problem is that the virus is carried by rabbit fleas and mosquitoes so the disease can be passed on without direct contact. The incubation period is two days to a week and the first sign is the development of puffy eyelids and a purulent (pus-producing) conjunctivitis. Swelling under the skin extends around the eyes, ears and genital region. Death is usually 18 days to three weeks after infection but occasionally animals will survive and signs regress over three months.



Pregnant animals should not be vaccinated, nor rabbits less than six weeks old. Occasionally there is a local reaction at the injection site but compared with the lethal infection seen of many unvaccinated animals this is insignificant.

Viral hemorrhagic disease

This disease was first noticed in China many years ago but now has an almost worldwide distribution. Viral hemorrhagic disease is caused by a calicivirus and, although the incubation period is up to three days, animals may die suddenly without any clinical signs. If there are signs they include anorexia (not eating), pyrexia (fever) apathy and prostration. There may be convulsions and coma, dyspnea (difficulty breathing), a mucoid foaming at the mouth or a bloody nasal discharge. Some animals survive this acute phase but die a few weeks later of liver disease and jaundice.

Given the horrendous death experienced by affected rabbits, every rabbit should be vaccinated annually or even every six months in areas where the disease is rampant.

Two other infectious diseases of rabbits are *Encephalitozoan cuniculi* and *Pasteurella multocida*.

Encephalitozoan cuniculi

This disease, also known as *Nosema cuniculi*, causes a chronic latent condition in rabbits, with active disease being characterized by neurological signs such as seizures, paralysis and eventually coma. There are no particularly effective drugs to treat the disease although sulphonamide antibiotics may be useful. Encephalitozoonosis has been described in a few cases in people but its significance is not really known. This underlines the importance of always washing your hands after handling any animal and particularly before eating or preparing food.



Pasteurella multocida

Pasteurella is a bacterium which commonly causes abscesses and inflammatory disease in rabbits. It can infect the nasolacrimal (tear) duct, and can cause abscesses of tooth roots, skin or internal organs. A very common problem associated with the organism is upper respiratory tract infection causing snuffles. Indeed it may be that most rabbits have this organism in their noses but the immune system keeps it at bay. Only when the rabbit is under stress can the bacterium start to cause overt clinical problems. Treatment may include antibiotics but these do not penetrate well into the pus produced by Pasteurella infection. Also, rabbits do not take kindly to antibiotics since they upset the delicate balance of normal bacteria in their gut, so vital for digestion. Surgery is possible if the abscess is in or under the skin but abscesses in the middle ear (causing balance problems), in the eyeball (causing blindness) or in the internal organs, are less easy to treat. Because some form of stress probably triggers clinical disease, it is important to keep your rabbit as healthy as possible and this will mean taking him or her to your veterinarian at least once a year for a thorough general examination.